

Jeopardy Assessment
for the Proposed Incidental Taking Permit
of the Blanding's Turtle and Wood Turtle, Mueller Property, Columbia County

Background

Project Information

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is proposing a restoration project in Columbia County. The Mueller Project involves: 4 berm breaches (this will allow for flood waters to act more naturally with rising and receding river events), one ditch-fill, one wetland scrape if additional fill is needed for the ditch-fill, cool-season grass establishment in the crop field.

Current land use within the project boundary consists primarily of row-crop production (corn and soybean rotation) and floodplain forest community along the Baraboo River. The forested areas contain primarily deciduous species such as silver maple and cottonwoods. The areas with the berm removal are on the edge of the existing crop field or just inside the forested area. These areas will also involve removing the trees in those sections of the berm. The remainder of the restored area will consist of the establishment of cool-season grasses in the cropped area.

Species Information

Blanding's turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*) are listed as a Threatened species in Wisconsin. They utilize a wide variety of aquatic habitats including deep and shallow marshes, shallow bays of lakes and impoundments where areas of dense emergent and submergent vegetation exists, sluggish streams, oxbows and other backwaters of rivers, drainage ditches (usually where wetlands have been drained), and sedge meadows and wet meadows adjacent to these habitats.

Wood turtles (*Clemmys insculpta*), a Threatened species in Wisconsin, prefer clean rivers and streams with moderate to fast flows and adjacent riparian wetlands and upland deciduous forests. This species often forages in open wet meadows or in shrub-carr habitats dominated by speckled alder. They overwinter in streams and rivers in deep holes or undercut banks where there is enough water flow to prevent freezing. This semi-terrestrial species tends to stay within about 300 meters of rivers and streams but exceptions certainly occur, especially within the driftless area of southwestern and western Wisconsin.

Jeopardy Assessment

This project provides long-term habitat improvement, provides critical habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species, and provides increased stability (permanent cover) in an environmentally sensitive, flood-prone area. By establishing permanent conservation cover on the previously cropped area, erosion will be reduced and water quality will be enhanced. Also, by placing a permanent conservation easement on this parcel, environmental quality and increased wildlife habitat will be ensured. The short-term disruption incurred on this site will be minimal. As a result, we anticipate that take of Blanding's turtles and wood turtles will be low. The department has determined that the proposed project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence or recovery of the state population of these animals or the whole plant-animal community of which they are a part, if the conservation measures listed below are followed. The benefits to public safety justify this activity. The basis for this assessment is that the large benefit to the species and natural communities in the area far outweighs the small amount of temporary disturbance associated with this project.

Conservation Measures

- Ideally all cool season seed planting should occur between May 6th and May 20th. Since there is suitable nesting habitat nearby, if planting is done from May 20th – July 5th, it should only occur between 10:00am and 5:00pm as to avoid likely times a turtle will be present. There are no time restrictions after July 5th.
- There are two recommended options to prevent impacting the two turtle species during the ditch, berm, and scrape construction:
 - In order to prevent impacting turtles that may be present in these areas we recommend having a qualified biologist walk the proposed ditch, berm, and scrape areas to remove any Blanding's or Wood turtles. Removed turtles should be placed outside the project area in suitable turtle habitat.
 - A second option would be to install exclusion fencing prior to May 20th for the berm and scrape areas to avoid the take of any Blanding's or Wood turtles that may be present. Once the fencing is up, be sure to remove any turtles caught inside. The exclusion fencing will prevent any adults from wandering into the construction area.